Continuums: Assessing your progress as a writer

Continuums are a way of assessing your progress as a writer that simultaneously guides you toward the kind of writer you hope to be. In mathematics and geometry, a continuum looks like this:

The arrows point to the past and the future. Think about this as a visual metaphor for charting your progress: you move FROM a place of less proficiency TO a place of more proficiency. Different aspects of your writing will fall along different points on the continuum; perhaps you are particularly good at revision, but not so good at coming up with ideas. A continuum statement can help you define what you already know about yourself as a writer, and can help you to chart a plan for improvement. Here are a few examples from Barbara Danish and the Writing Center staff at New York University:

DEVELOPING A RELATIONSHIP TO WRITING
FROM writing according to rules, for the teacher, only to fulfill an assignment, and often with a feeling of apprehension,
TO writing with commitment and curiosity about your ideas, your beliefs, your feelings, and your questions as a way to think through problems, reflect on experience, and elicit greater understanding, and to develop ways of working that enable you to do this.

HELPING THE WRITING COMMUNITY DEVELOP AND SUSTAIN ITSELF
FROM being a passive learner, waiting to be told what to do,
TO taking responsibility for your learning, looking to resources like classmates, teachers and handbooks when you run into problems, and collaborating with students and teachers to make the class what you want it to be within the parameters of the course.

GENERATING WRITING
FROM having little confidence and few strategies for getting words on paper,
TO being confident that you have many experiences, thoughts and ideas from which to begin, and have strategies to help you get started (i.e., freewriting, focused freewriting, listing, branching, diagramming, and language play).

RESPONDING
FROM responding to your own or their peers’ writing by merely making corrections,
TO responding as interested readers who want to help writers figure out, develop, and accomplish their objective by using strategies such as active listening, believing and doubting, hearing the heart of a piece, telling the movies of your mind’s movement through the piece, and proposing possibilities for revising.
FINDING AN IDEA
FROM being unaware of the connections between thoughts, images, evidence that you have generated in your writing
TO learning how to make connections and discover in them an idea that represents your tentative conclusion about their meaning.

REVISING
FROM revising by fixing or correction,
TO revising by extending, relating, complicating, supporting and clarifying your ideas and making those ideas accessible to other readers.

REVISING, continued
FROM ignoring or implementing without question readers’ responses,
TO assessing those responses and using them for substantive revision like rethinking the idea, shifting the focus, generating new sections, reorganizing parts, rewriting sections.

USING LANGUAGE
FROM taking language for granted and not paying much attention to it,
TO being aware of language in order to play with it, listen to its possibilities, and know how to use it more effectively.

REFLECTING
FROM seeing thinking as having reactions,
TO seeing thinking as a highly complex and often challenging process of exploring, considering possibilities, drawing connections, and redefining ideas.

USING WRITING CLASSES IN THE UNIVERSITY
FROM working in writing classes as though they were discrete classes unconnected to other course work,
TO applying the ways we write, think, and learn in writing classes—with commitment and curiosity, individually and collaboratively—to your work in other classes and work situations.

WRITING ESSAYS
FROM producing an essay that presents a pre-figured conclusion,
TO producing an essay that is a sustained accounting of an idea that develops out of a real question, a genuine concern.

UNDERSTANDING IDEA
FROM understanding idea to be a topic,
TO understanding idea to be a tentative conclusion about a topic, issue, or question developed out of research you have accumulated (evidence such as experience, information gathered through research, experiments, etc.), a tentative conclusion that may change as you acquire new information and experience.
NAMING HOW AN ESSAY WORKS TO ACHIEVE MEANING
FROM being unaware that writers craft their essays to achieve meaning,
TO being aware that writers make choices in crafting an essay,
TO being able to recognize, name and use such strategies oneself to create meaning
(for example, using stories, analogy, transition, metaphor, incorporation of texts,
repetition, comparison, contrast, time shifts).

SATISFYING THE READER’S EXPECTATIONS
FROM assuming that whoever reads your essay will understand your meaning and
intentions,
TO imagining and satisfying readers’ expectations with regard to your meaning.

EDITING THE TEXT
FROM producing an essay with errors that may distract the reader or obscure meaning,
TO using writing conventions—grammar, syntax, punctuation, spelling—correctly so
that they will add to the clarification of meaning and to the pleasure of reading the text.